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ACTION DRL-02

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LAB-01 L-00 NSAE-00 NSCE-00 OIC-02 OPIC-01 PRS-00
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DEPARTMENT FOR DRL/IRF AND EAP/BCLTV

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/05/2012

TAGS: PHUM KIRF SOCI VM ETMIN HUMANR RELFREE

SUBJECT: EVANGELICAL PASTOR'S VIEWS ON HOUSE CHURCHES AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

THIS IS AN AMCONGEN HO CHI MINH CITY CABLE. CLASSIFIED BY EMI YAMAUCHI, CONSUL GENERAL, REASON 1.5 (D).

¶1. (C) PASTOR NGUYEN HONG QUANG, CHAIRMAN OF THE MENNONITE CHURCH AND MEMBER OF THE VIETNAM EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP OF HOUSE CHURCHES (VEF),
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RECENTLY VISITED THE CONGEN. THE VEF IS NOT REGISTERED WITH THE GVN AND IS THEREFORE NOT A RECOGNIZED RELIGION. QUANG, WHO IS A RELATIVELY NEW BUT SEEMINGLY RELIABLE RELIGIOUS ACTIVIST, BROUGHT ALONG PHOTOS AND "TESTIMONIES" OF TWO HOUSE CHURCH PASTORS WHO HAD BEEN SUBJECT TO HARASSMENT AND/OR BEATINGS IN HO CHI MINH CITY AND KON TUM PROVINCE IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS. POST IS IN THE PROCESS OF TRANSLATING/SUMMARIZING THE 25-PLUS PAGES OF DOCUMENTS, POLICE COMPLAINTS, ETC.

¶2. (C) QUANG IS PERSONALLY ACQUAINTED WITH THE TWO VICTIMS. THE HCMC VICTIM IS A HOUSE CHURCH PASTOR WHOSE HOME WAS RAIDED BY POLICE. ACCORDING TO QUANG, THE HCMC PASTOR WAS THREATENED BUT NOT HARMED. THE POLICE INSTEAD WALKED OFF WITH HIS TELEVISION SET, RADIO, AND OTHER HOUSEHOLD EFFECTS. (POST NOTE: POST HAS HEARD SIMILAR STORIES IN THE PAST ABOUT CONFISCATED TELEVISIONS, BICYCLES, ETC. IN THE PROVINCES, BUT SUCH OCCURRENCES ARE SOMEWHAT UNUSUAL IN HCMC.) HE WAS WARNED TO STOP ILLEGAL RELIGIOUS MEETINGS.

¶3. (C) THE KON TUM PROVINCE VICTIM WAS A HOUSE CHURCH PASTOR WHOSE MOTORCYCLE WAS RUN OFF THE ROAD, ALLEGEDLY BY PLAINCLOTHES POLICEMEN. THE PASTOR WAS TAKEN TO JAIL FOR "CAUSING" THE ACCIDENT, AND WAS BEATEN BADLY ENOUGH TO BE ADMITTED TO A HOSPITAL, ACCORDING TO QUANG. ENCLOSED WITH THE KON TUM PROVINCE VICTIM'S TESTIMONY WERE PHOTOS, WHICH CLEARLY SHOWED CUTS AND BRUISES ON THE HEAD AND NECK, AND TORN CLOTHING.

¶4. (C) IN RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS FROM THE CG, QUANG RESPONDED:

-- HE HIMSELF HAS HAD MEETINGS WITH GVN AUTHORITIES FROM THE MINISTRY OF PUBLIC SECURITY (MPS), THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS, NATIONAL ASSEMBLY MEMBERS, ETC. HE BELIEVES THAT AT THE NATIONAL
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LEVEL, THE GVN IS MAKING AN EFFORT TO UNDERSTAND THE HOUSE CHURCH EVANGELICAL MOVEMENT AND TO IMPROVE TREATMENT OF "NON-REGISTERED RELIGIOUS BELIEVERS."

-- IN SPITE OF THE ABOVE CASE OF HARASSMENT IN HCMC, QUANG BELIEVES THE LEVEL AND FREQUENCY OF SUCH INCIDENTS HAVE DECLINED GRADUALLY THIS YEAR. AS PROOF, HE SHOWED US HIS NEW "HOUSEHOLD REGISTRATION" BOOKLET, WHICH MAKES HIM AN OFFICIAL HCMC RESIDENT. THIS WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE, HE NOTED, WITHOUT THE SUPPORT OF THE HCMC RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE.

-- IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS, HE BELIEVES THERE HAS NOT BEEN MUCH CHANGE. HARASSMENT AND BEATINGS OCCUR WHEN POLICE DISCOVER "ILLEGAL MEETINGS" HOSTED BY UNREGISTERED HOUSE CHURCH LEADERS.

¶5. (C) QUANG DID NOT WISH US TO RAISE THESE SPECIFIC CASES WITH VIETNAMESE AUTHORITIES. HE SAID IT WAS ENOUGH THAT THE USG WAS "AWARE OF THESE INCIDENTS" AND THAT WE WOULD "RECORD THESE PROBLEMS" FOR THE ANNUAL HUMAN RIGHTS AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORTS.

¶6. (C) IN RESPONSE TO CG'S QUESTION ABOUT ANOTHER VISIT TO THE CENTRAL

HIGHLANDS, QUANG INDICATED THAT THE FELLOWSHIP OF HOUSE CHURCHES WAS PLANNING A CONFERENCE IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS IN LATE JUNE. IF THE CONFERENCE WENT SMOOTHLY, THE FELLOWSHIP'S EXECUTIVE BOARD WOULD SEEK TO MEET WITH PROVINCIAL OFFICIALS. IN THE MEANTIME, FOR HIS FELLOWSHIP'S OWN PURPOSES, HE DID NOT BELIEVE CALLING INCREASED ATTENTION TO THE HIGHLANDS WAS HELPFUL. HE SEEMED CERTAIN THAT THE KONTUM PASTOR WOULD WELCOME A VISIT FROM CONGENOFFS.

17. (C) COMMENT: QUANG, WHO MET WITH THE COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM THIS PAST FEBRUARY, HAS IMPRESSED US AS A SERIOUS, CONFIDENTIAL

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DETERMINED CRUSADER FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM. THIS WAS, HOWEVER, OUR FIRST MEETING WITH HIM ALONE (USUALLY HE IS WITH TWO OR THREE OTHER PASTORS OF OTHER PROTESTANT DENOMINATIONS). HE DREW A CLEAR LINE BETWEEN THE GVN CENTRAL GOVERNMENT AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES - WHETHER THEY WERE OFFICIALS OF THE RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS COMMITTEES, MINISTRY OF PUBLIC SECURITY, PEOPLE'S COMMITTEES, OR POLICE DEPARTMENT. HE ACKNOWLEDGED THERE HAD BEEN SOME MODEST PROGRESS IN MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING WITH GVN OFFICIALS, AND SHOWED US PHOTOS OF SEVERAL HOUSE CHURCH LEADERS AT MEETINGS WITH MPS, PEOPLE'S COMMITTEES, AND RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS COMMITTEES IN HANOI. QUANG IS FINDING IT JUST AS DIFFICULT AS WE DO, HOWEVER, TO FIGURE OUT WHO EXACTLY CONTROLS EACH OF THE PROVINCIAL, DISTRICT, VILLAGE, AND HAMLET PEOPLE'S COMMITTEES/COUNCILS, POLICE DEPARTMENTS, AND RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS COMMITTEES -- AND HOW THE GVN CAN COMMUNICATE ITS OWN INCREMENTAL ATTITUDE CHANGES EFFECTIVELY TO THEM.
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